

Amy Miller: Making it in Bridgetown

Portland's Funniest Person 2015, talks about poverty, feminism and 'daddy issues'

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

It's official. Amy Miller is Portland's funniest person — the first time a woman has won Helium Comedy Club's top honor. Raised in the Bay Area near San Francisco, Miller grew up more wallflower, less center of attention. These days, though, you wouldn't know it. Miller is captain of her own comedy ship.

In the two years since Miller arrived in Portland, she and other budding comics have become a kind of glue that is forming the new face of comedy and putting Portland on the map as a serious comedy town.

Miller's presence in the Portland comedy scene is constant. She hosts a monthly comedy revue called Midnight Mass at the Funhouse Lounge in Southeast Portland. It features the diversity of Portland comedy. At Helium, Miller hosts a hybrid stand-up comedy/therapy talk show. She hosts a podcast called "Sorry About Your Dad," which is basically talking to people about their "daddy issues." Everyone's got them, she says.

Miller was one of four children born to parents whose addiction issues and financial irresponsibility let poverty leak into their family experience. It has paid off in spades as fodder for a solid set of "white trash" jokes.

Of course, like any driven artist, Miller produces comedy locally while also looking to a larger pool. She travels to other cities to do stand-up whenever her schedule allows, and she is one of 40 semifinalists in NBC's reality comedy show, "Last Comic Standing."

The secret of her success, she says, is fake it until you make it.

Amy Miller: So much of comedy starting out is you just to have to fake being in control because there is nothing less funny than someone on stage who does not seem to be driving the ship. That is the room; that is the collective experience. If the person in the middle of it doesn't seem in control, then it all goes off the rails.

I can come off as quite shy — less so now. Sometimes maybe I come off as dumb.

Sue Zalokar: I don't believe that for a second.

A.M.: Well, I don't know, maybe some of it, a good chunk of it, is rooted in sexism. For

whatever reason when people first meet me, they often think all of the same things: quiet, sweet, maybe not that smart. I don't know what that says. Maybe it's connected to the reason that all babies and dogs love me.

S.Z.: You have a bit about being "white trash." Did you grow up experiencing poverty?

A.M.: I grew up in the East Bay. Yeah. I mean both of my parents, until my dad died when I was 9, which upped the poverty scale when we went from two incomes to one. But before that, my parents were kind of like working-class people who had four children. On paper, we were not living at the poverty level, but when you layer on top of that a lot of addiction and financial irresponsibility, then poverty can leak its way in.

This was in the mid-'80s, the credit card boom. So I had credit card parents. It was a lot of feast or famine.

On the surface, my dad was a salesman and out in the world; you would not recognize, "Oh, that guy is poor." He was golfing with clients and things like that. But at home, we lived in a sort of abstract squalor. It was very dirty and very chaotic. We never knew necessarily when there would be groceries again, if there would be groceries again ... and then we would get a new credit card with a zero balance. (My parents') working jobs kept us above the poverty line, but we lived as if we had no money.

S.Z.: It only took you two years to become Portland's Funniest Person ... But I get the feeling that you miss the Bay Area. Why did you head to Portland?

A.M.: Partially for comedy, partially for a job. But I knew I needed to get away from home, and where I was in comedy was way too premature to be packing up and moving to L.A. Not to say that people don't do that, but it's a little hard to get attention if you jump into this massive pond — technically, the biggest entertainment pond that exists.

I had been up to Portland to do comedy, and I had heard of some comics who had either come from here or had recently left and

it seemed like a really good environment to just practice and get better and perform as much as I can. And maybe have the opportunity to shine a little bit more than I would have if I had gone to L.A., or stayed in the Bay Area for that matter.

S.Z.: It's a good strategy. It makes Portland sound like a comedy farm. It's cool that there is a vibrant-enough comedy scene here to draw comedians to be a part of it ... even if it's on a path to the larger pond. I don't think Portland is historically thought of as a comedy town.

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AMY MILLER

A.M.: That has been over the past four or five years, and with the Bridgetown Comedy Festival getting more important and also the opening of Helium (in Southeast Portland). Previously, Portland didn't have an A-level comedy club. Those two things really helped the scene grow.

As these sort of second- and third-tier comedy cities crop up and get more attention, people are making the move to a "middle city" before jumping to New York or L.A., just to practice essentially and be in a cheaper place for a while. When I got here, at the same time, Curtis Cook arrived and JoAnn Schinderle, David Mascorro and a handful of other comics all got to Portland like within the same six months, all with the same plan and all from different cities.

I certainly didn't invent this idea, but it has worked out pretty well for all of us.

S.Z.: You are in the top 40 on "Last Comic Standing" on NBC. You received rave reviews from the judges, but Norm MacDonald ... do you want to TP his house?

A.M.: (laughs) No! I love Norm MacDonald. He's an absolute genius. He's one of my favorite comics. He's got really specific comedic tastes. Even for a judge and even for a comedian, comedy is always going to be subjective. I wouldn't expect to necessarily be his cup of tea. On top of that, he did say really complimentary things, you know? They were kind of buried in his comments.

He says in the second bit of feedback that all the jokes were good to great. But that he



Amy Miller, who was raised in the San Francisco Bay Area and moved to Portland two years ago, won Helium Comedy Club's Portland's Funniest Person contest this year.

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just didn't think that there were certain topics that I was allowed to talk about. To me, that sounds really crazy especially if you've ever seen Norm MacDonald's stand-up comedy. He spares no group.

S.Z.: What about gender in comedy? How is it that Louis C.K. can make a joke about pedophilia, but if a woman makes a dark joke, it's suggested that maybe she shouldn't be discussing such dark topics?

A.M.: I mean, I think there were a couple factors. I think that they were judging me and I was one of the few people to do any dark material. And that may have made me stick out a little bit more. I don't think it was that edgy or crazy of material.

I always think that some percentage of feedback is going to be gendered in comedy. Whether or not that is true for Norm, I don't know. I know the show itself is run by all women, which was amazing and really refreshing — my first TV experience.

Maybe there aren't a lot of female comedians that Norm really likes, and that's just sort of how it is. Is part of it because I'm a girl? Yeah, maybe, but I can't really change

that either (laughs). I just have to do whatever it is I'm gonna do, and then eventually all those old guys will be dead.

S.Z.: Speaking of — how about the All Jane Comedy Festival? When you were writing your column "Fresh Meat" for Willamette Week, you interviewed Matt Wolfe, who made this angry, hostile poster mocking the all-female comedy festival.

A.M.: It was really interesting because so many people afterwards said that I fabricated it.

S.Z.: Really? People thought it was a joke?

A.M.: Definitely. People thought it was a publicity stunt on the part of the festival, that I made it up. That it was an Andy Kaufman-esque-level prank on everyone. Which, I was like, "Oh, thank you for comparing me to Andy Kaufman!"

I would have to have a lot of time in my life to pull this elaborate of a prank, which would be to put up fake posters, create a fake persona and then pretend to interview it. His responses were so dumb, I couldn't even write

them. I put the recordings of our actual interview online, and people were like, "Wow, I can't believe this is real."

He is a 100 percent real guy, and he was nice enough to grant me an interview. He was friendly to me. He is just extremely misguided.

When stuff like that happens that I feel people's feedback is really gendered. Where it's like the immediate response is that I made this up. Why would that even be a thing?

I don't know if it's because I'm a woman and I'm trying not to focus too much on it especially right now, after "Last Comic" has aired, because for the most part, all of my feedback has been really nice and supportive. There are always a couple of bad apples, and they're all men.

S.Z.: Really? All men?

A.M.: I think it makes some of them uncomfortable to see me or other women in that position.

I actually did a casual sort of search of everyone who was tweeting about "Last Comic" one night. Every negative response I

found was to me or one of the other women. They might claim that it is something else: "I hated your jokes" or "You're being disrespectful to your dad" or whatever it is ... that's fine. But there have been 40 comedians that have performed over the last three weeks and the negative reviews are overwhelming to the women. There is just no way to feel like there isn't a very specific reason for that.

S.Z.: What are your thoughts about the sexual assault accusations against Bill Cosby?

A.M.: He's a monster, and it's really sad and disgusting. It is tragic how much, aside from his being a comedian, I think America as a culture has some really serious undiagnosed "daddy issues." It is so much more than him being a comedian or him being an intellectual black man. Refusal of people to accept his guilt is more closely tied to him being one of our cultural "dad figures."

It's hard to have a role model or a father, authority figure, and to see them as flawed. It's hard to see our own fathers as flawed a lot of the time.

It's disgusting that he has quieted all of these women for so many years — and we all

see the roots of this in our own comedy communities on a very small scale.

If someone behaved inappropriately — and recently we have had some comedians in Portland be accused of sexual assault, as well — it's hard for women in comedy, or any industry, to speak up because if you are a part of this community and someone has a lot of power in it, you don't want to rock the boat.

I've never been sexually assaulted — knock on wood — but I understand how it can be really scary to come forward. It's disgusting that we have to be so strongly afraid of not being believed that we have to keep it under wraps.

S.Z.: (Miller has described herself as "a dedicated/obsessed Dolly Parton fan.") What's so great about Dolly Parton?

A.M.: Oh! Speaking of feminism and people who have made their way through a male-dominated profession!

She is very authentic, though some people like to argue against because she has had lots of surgery and she (projects a kind of Barbie doll image).

One of my favorite quotes of hers is: "If I hadn't been born a woman, I'd have definitely been a drag queen." But at the core, she is very authentic.

And she represents someone who came out of absolute poverty and nothing but a supportive family. She made her own way, and she has always made decisions based on what she thinks is best for her, her music and the people who enjoy it rather than what people were telling her to do. A lot of those decisions upset some people.

At one point, Elvis wanted to cover "I Will Always Love You" and he wanted half of the profits, and she said, "Absolutely not." She thought someone else would come along that would do the song justice. And she was absolutely right about that. (Whitney Houston performed it as the theme song for the film "The Bodyguard" in the '90s).

She has always been very true to herself and very assertive. I think similarly to what we were talking about earlier, people have made assumptions about her, including that she's dumb, and that she would be passive. And she has made her way through this industry on her own terms. She's one of the best female role models.

She has managed to be a feminist that also does all of these unfeminist things like using her sexuality many times and wearing all of this makeup and gets plastic surgery and talks about it.

If it's not for you, it's not for you, but it's what I like to do, and I can still be a powerful woman while fitting into these other (roles). She has used it to her advantage.

She always says the way she got through country music and being in a male-dominated profession is that she distracts them long enough with her looks and while they're thinking that she's dumb, she's already halfway out the door with their money. And I love that.